

My life in Porridge

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by Neal Robertson



THIS YEAR sees the 25th running of the Golden Spurtle World Porridge Championships at Carrbridge on the 6th of October, it will also be my tenth year in the competition. If they let me compete this year, my entry is in but hasn't been confirmed yet!

What started out as a bit of fun to attract publicity for my patented double backed wooden spoon has now become a serious porridge addiction. When I first entered I thought I would just be cooking porridge in a wee village hall in the highlands. I certainly didn't expect to see competitors from all across the globe being paraded through the town

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led by a pipe band and crowds of people queuing to try all the different versions of porridge.

When I actually won the Golden Spurtle in 2010 (10.10.10 as it says on my tattoo!) I really wasn't prepared for the level of interest from the press. Matt Cox from Oregon won the previous year, the first non-Scot to do so, and I was seen as having brought the title back to Scotland. It was featured in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Cook Islands News*, even the *Fife Herald* covered it! I did live radio in America, Canada and Ireland and even had a six week slot on the *Two Johns breakfast show* in Melbourne. They introduced me to the strains of the Bluebell Polka every week, a nice touch with my home town being Auchtermuchty where Sir Jimmy Shand OBE lived most of his life.

I appeared on *Landward*, *The Hour* and *The One Show* and BBC Alba featured me in a lovely wee documentary, *Brochan Lom tana Lom*, which still gets repeated occasionally. The undoubted highlight for me was being asked to cook porridge at Bute House for Alex Salmond and the Scottish Cabinet to mark World Porridge Day in aid of Mary's Meals, a charity I have supported ever since.

So in 2011 we all travelled up to Carrbridge again, wife and dogs included, and stayed over at the Cairn Hotel to be at the heart of the porridge action. We've stayed there every year since, it's a super place and a proper pub too.

I'd based my speciality dish on something Gerry Rae, head cook at Simpsons in the Strand who is actually from Glasgow, cooked for me on one of my trips south and it turned out to be good enough because I won the speciality title. I'm still the only person with his name on both trophies. This also turned out to be another "bringing it home to Scotland" story as the previous winner was Catherine Caldwell from Calgary.

Since then we have had winners from all over the world and all walks of life, America, Germany, London, Norway and Manchester, including a nephrologist and an astrophysicist.

Our current champions are both from Sweden and I would like to claim a small part in their success. Last year my wife and I were invited out to Sweden to judge their porridge championships. We travelled to Copenhagen then north to Sweden over the amazing Oresund Bridge, still prefer the Queensferry Crossing though. We were staying at Steninge Vandrarhem near Halmstad on the west coast, a lovely activity hostel and yoga centre run by Catarina and Per who treated us to some traditional Swedish hospitality, even some Swedish single malt whisky! The result was that Elinor and Per won the titles in Sweden then came to Carrbridge and claimed the world titles.



I do my best to taste all the entries at the porridge championships, although it can be a bit of a struggle with the audience getting to taste them all as well! It's fascinating to taste the difference between twenty or more bowls of porridge made with just oatmeal, salt and water. People usually bring their own ingredients with them so we've had wild oat mixtures, spring branch water and even pink Hawaiian sea salt. The speciality competition has also produced some amazing creations over the years. I particularly enjoyed the savoury versions made by Laurie Figone and Chris Young and have made them at home since, but it is usually the marriage of oats and berries that comes out on top. Per's creation last year with the brulee topping was outstanding. Of course nobody who tasted Simon Rookyard's Podgeree will ever forget it!

I hear that preparations are well under way for this year's competition, Russian championships have been held and the winner is coming over, the American competition is now running online and we are going back to Sweden to judge their competition again. I hope I've inspired you to get

creative with your porridge and to visit Carrbridge for the Golden Spurtle!

I've included my winning speciality recipe here and you'll find more at www.goldenspurtle.com, I hear there is a recipe book coming out soon as well. I've also included my Cullen Skink recipe which won their World Championship in 2014, that's a whole other story.

If you would like me to come along to your group to talk about and demonstrate porridge making, with tastings, please contact me at tannochbrae1@aol.com or follow me on twitter @thesponguy. Finally if you would like to know more about my double backed wooden spoon you'll find it at www.thesponco.com or on Amazon.

Nobody who tasted Simon Rookyard's Podgeree will ever forget it!

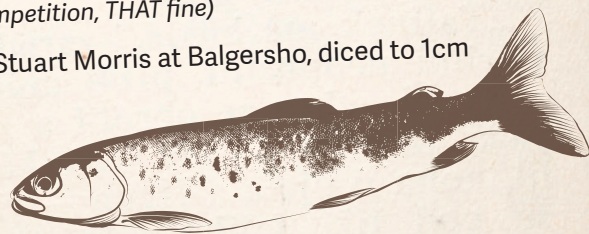


Winning Cullen Skink Recipe

Makes 3 hearty or 4 generous portions

INGREDIENTS:

- Medium onion very finely diced
(I lost a bit of fingernail during the competition, THAT fine)
- 250g Duke of York potatoes from Stuart Morris at Balgersho, diced to 1cm
- 25g unsalted Scottish butter
- 10ml Stark's rapeseed oil
- Salt and pepper
- 300ml water from your favourite well
- 250g undyed smoked haddock from the lovely wee fish shop in Lady Wynd, Cupar (make the effort, you do want to win!)
- 500ml full fat gold top milk from Graham's
- Chiffonade of parsley and chives



METHOD:

1. Lay the fish in a wide enough pan for it to lie flat, cover with the milk and bring to the boil. Turn off the heat and leave to rest for five minutes.
2. Tip the onion, butter, oil, salt and pepper into a large pan and fry gently until the onion is transparent. You are smart enough to know that if the onion colours it will become bitter and you will have to start again. Tip in the potato and fry for another few moments. Crank up the heat and add the water, lift the fish from the milk and pour it in. Ease down to a gentle simmer (the soup, not you).
3. Break the fish into large chunks, removing any skin or bones.
4. Chop some parsley and chives until you can't bear to chop any more, that is a chiffonade.
5. *Tricky bit klaxon*
Not that tricky, really. Take a couple of ladles of the soup and pound in a mortar and pestle until smooth, then tip back in. You now have a thick soup that still has chunks in it, Aren't you clever!
6. Slide the fish back into the soup, warm through gently then serve with a sprinkle of chiffonade on top and crusty home made bread on the side. You DO make your own bread, don't you!

Neal Robertson
World Cullen Skink Champion 2014
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Winter Spiced Porridge with Blueberry Compote



Serves 2

FOR THE COMPOTE:

- 100g blueberries
- 40g golden caster sugar

FOR THE PORRIDGE:

- 80g medium oatmeal
- 300ml water
- 300ml single cream
- a pinch of salt
- 1tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg
- 2 dessert spoon heather honey

METHOD:

1. To make the compote, bring the berries and sugar to the boil until the berries burst and the sugar dissolves. Add more sugar to taste.
2. To make the porridge, toast the spices in the oven for 5 minutes to take away the rawness and set aside. Boil the oatmeal and water until the water is absorbed, then add all the other ingredients and cook until thickened.
3. Check seasoning and serve topped with the warmed compote.

